

Dewey's original 'way of life'

It was rustic, but idyllic, in the years before World War II

By Jean M. Abplanalp

My family, the Murdocks, fell in love with isolated Dewey Beach in 1933. The Great Depression was upon us, and money was scarce, but life was idyllic. There were several old cottages along the oceanfront and a sprinkling of houses in the next block throughout the area. We stayed in the first rental cottage built by early developer Jack Redefer in what would become Rehoboth By The Sea in north Dewey.

At times you may have seen a solitary surf fisherman or swimmer, but no other person for easily a half mile on the beach. Families kept their dory boats, usually made in Nova Scotia, pulled near the dunes on the beach. When not in the water, the boats were kept on log rollers which were used to help push the boat into the ocean for a fishing trip. The men then rowed beyond the surf to various fishing spots. Bountiful catches that included trout, croakers, kingfish and porgies were hooked in a short time.

Life was more primitive then. Cottage owners used kerosene stoves and ice boxes filled by the local "iceman." Blackberries grew wild on most unoccupied lots. The side roads were all sand and the highway stopped at Joseph's General Store, which would later become the Bottle & Cork. If you traveled beyond this point, you would have to deflate your tires and follow old paths and tire tracks and expect to frequently get stuck in the sand or marsh.

The Murdocks' interest in Dewey Beach eventually drew their good friends, Mary and Francis Duggan and their children, Mary Pat and Francis (better known as "Duke") to the area. Later, the Duggans opened the Starboard Restaurant next to their home. My parents became storekeepers for a time, leasing "Bea" McColley's "Bea Hive" Market across Saulsbury Street from the Starboard after my Dad retired from teaching. Local boys Eddie and Harry Lewis helped in the store for many years. Later, Harry owned a bait and bicycle shop in Bethany Beach.

Capt. Dan Simpler, known as "Captain Dan," built sailboats near his restaurant and dock on Rehoboth Bay. In addition to the sailboats, Captain Dan had rental rowboats that could be used for crabbing or fishing. Bushel baskets of crabs could be caught from his rowboats or off his pier, while plentiful "soft-shells" and

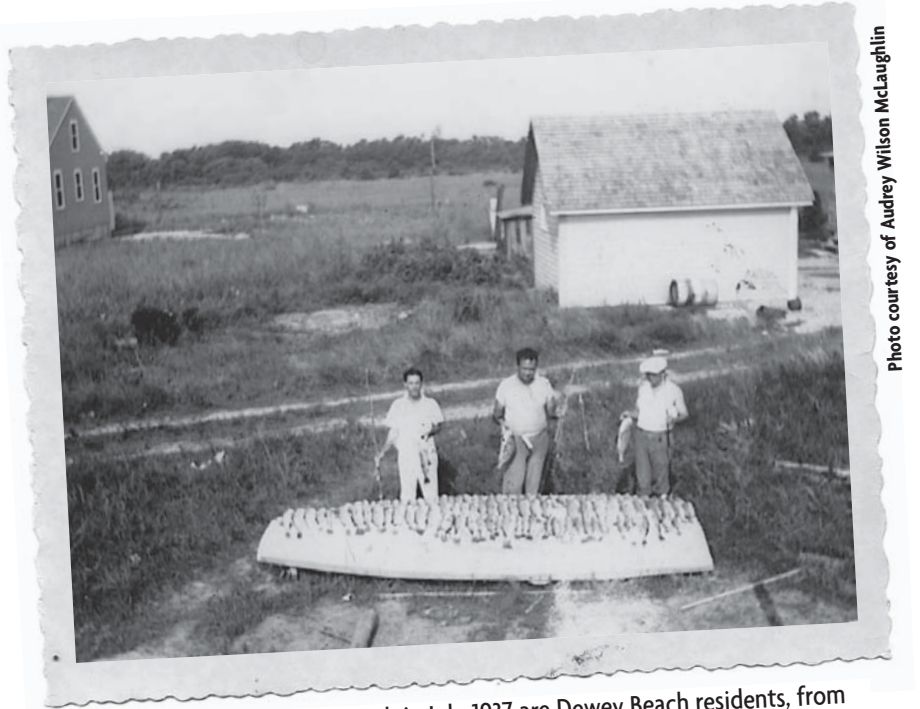


Photo courtesy of Audrey Wilson McLaughlin

Showing off a typical day's catch in July 1937 are Dewey Beach residents, from left, Watson Wilson, Jack Murdock and Sidney McCord.

"peelers" could be found nesting along the shoreline.

The boys who worked for Captain Dan loved to play tricks on him, according to Nan Tyndall, who was married to the affable Pat Tyndall of the Rehoboth Beach Post Office. (Nan managed Captain Dan's restaurant, the Dewey Inn on the bay at Bellevue Street, and later the Acme store on Rehoboth Avenue in Rehoboth Beach.) Nan recalls that Captain Dan liked to nap on the boats occasionally, and the boys would cut him loose without oars. He would leave his shoes on the dock while napping and they would nail his shoes to the dock.

There were several houseboats along the edge of the bay, one of which was occupied by Johnny Waples, a longtime resident of the area.

Mail service was not available in Dewey Beach at that time, so we picked up our mail at the arcade on Rehoboth Avenue (the site of the present-day Grotto Pizza).

The Rehoboth U.S. Coast Guard Station (called the "Rehoboth" station even though it was located in what is now Dewey Beach), with its 50-foot flag towers and mast at the top, had been in operation as a lifesaving station near Dagsworthy Street for more than half a century. ➤



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Photo courtesy of Jean Aplanalp

Jean Murdock (later Aplanalp) and her father, Jack, wear the woolen bathing suits common in the 1930s.

One of the men stationed there and at the Indian River Coast Guard Station in the 1930s was Joseph Walker Jr. At that time, Joe met his future bride, Lillian Cannon, who had been raised on a farm near Dagsboro. Besides managing his farm, her dad was a tugboat captain, operating out of Philadelphia. A number of captains owned and operated farms in that area in addition to their sea duties.

Lillian recalls driving through the undeveloped land without the benefit of paved roads to the old inlet (which was north of the present inlet), where she would meet Joe, who would row across the narrow inlet to bring her over for a visit. They married in 1930 and moved into a house on the Indian River Station grounds.

Lillian and her son, Joseph III, who served in the Coast Guard for 29 years, described the typical "watch duty": The men worked four-hour watches, from midnight to 4 a.m., or from 4 a.m. to 8 a.m., around the clock. During the rest of the time, the men performed other duties.

During World War II, the men would patrol the beach. One would walk north from the inlet and one would walk south from Dewey, looking for enemy ships off shore. They would meet at a key box, which was equidistant between

the two stations. Upon arriving at the box, they would open the box with a key. Inside was another key, attached to a chain. The guardsmen would insert the key into their clocks and turn it — this would punch the time on a paper dial within the clock, verifying that they had walked the full five-mile distance. The clock could not be opened except at the station. This is how Key Box Road got its name.

The Coast Guardsmen would have weekly practice rescues with the boats and the breeches buoy (a rope-and-pulley contraption used to rescue shipwrecked sailors). They would paint the station and the boats, and keep the equipment in top-notch shape.

Every seven days, the men would be eligible for one or two days' leave. When Joe was assigned to the inlet station, Lillian would drive south, beyond the present highway, to pick him up. If weather conditions were dry, she would drive on the bay side of the barrier island, and, if wet, she drove on the beach side. She recalls a 1933 "nor'easter" that lasted for nine days, making all travel difficult.

In 1933-34, Joe and Lillian were able to buy the house they occupied at the station and move it to Clayton Street, where they continued to live with their daughter, Barbara, and two sons, Wayne and Joseph III. Joe Jr. was transferred to the Rehoboth Station in 1937, and later to the Brandywine Light. He retired after 26 years of service with the Coast Guard.

His sons also retired after long careers in the Coast Guard, and his grandson Anthony is currently a Coast Guard officer. A true U.S. Coast Guard family!

Joe and Lillian bought the Rehoboth Beach Coast Guard Station after it was decommissioned and moved it to Route 1 (along what in recent years has been called "The Forgotten Mile") and lived there for a number of years. Later, the station was moved to Shipcarpenter's Square in Lewes, where it still serves as a private residence.

Many longtime Dewey Beach residents remember the Shakespeare family, summer residents who included the winner of an Olympic gold medal. That was Franklin Shakespeare, who, along with his brother, John, and his parents, Frank and Lucinda Shakespeare and Lucinda's daughter, Lucy Darby,



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Photograph courtesy of Jean Abplanalp

The Bea Hive Market, owned by "Bea" McColley, was operated by Betty and Jack Murdock for a time in the 1950s, when this photo was taken. The "Bunker House" is in the background. This location is the current site of Izzy Plaza, near the Starboard.

summered on Swedes Street in the 1930s and '40s.

In 1952, Franklin was a member of the U.S. Naval Academy rowing team that won the gold medal at the Olympic Games in Helsinki, Finland. In 1954, Franklin and the team were elected to the Rowing Hall of Fame, and in 1982 he was inducted into the Delaware Sports Hall of Fame.

The Shakespeares, whose year-round home was in Dover, vacationed in what is now called the "Bunker House" and the adjacent cottage, both owned by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Carlisle. Henry Carlisle and Col. George Bunker were friends, and when Henry died in 1944, he left the big brown-shingled apartment building on Swedes Street to Col. Bunker's daughter, Mary Frances. From that point on, the name of the building became the "Bunker House."

The "Bunker House" was moved about five blocks away to Elizabeth Avenue in recent years to make way for new development on the highway.

Franklin Shakespeare remembers watching Swedes Street resident Sidney McCord build his stone cottage next to his frame cottage on that street. McCord built many of the brick power-service buildings that you see throughout the Dewey-Rehoboth area. McCord lived there with his wife, Nan, sons Earl and

Stanley, and daughter Mildred (nicknamed "Mickey").

Franklin and his wife, Shirley, now live in Towson, Md. He says that the easygoing lifestyle ended when World War II began. He recalls that residents no longer kept their boats on the beach and there were no more squatters along the dunes just south of Dewey. He remembers Coast Guardsmen clearing the beaches at sunset and patrolling on horseback with dogs, and Army men building "pillboxes" along the beach with logs and sandbags during the war years.

In late afternoon and early morning, his family would watch ships forming and disbanding convoys that helped protect them from German submarines that lurked off the Atlantic coast.

The Shakespeares, the Walkers, the McCords and other families from that era have moved on, and the rustic way of life they knew would never return to Dewey Beach. ■

Jean Abplanalp is a lifelong vacationer to Dewey Beach and has been a full-time resident of Lewes since 1989.

This reminiscence is an edited excerpt from the new edition of "Dewey Beach: History & Tales," compiled by Barbara Dougherty, and available at local bookstores.